Chapter 4

Culinary Memories and Rituals in Divakaruni's Select Novels

Food for us comes from our relatives, whether they have wings or fins or roots. That is how we consider food. Food has a culture. It has a history. It has a story. It has relationships.

Winona Laduke

Divakaruni has commented on the significant position that the culinary motif occupies in her fictional narratives, as is clear from her candid confession in one of her interviews: "One of the things I most enjoy writing about in my novels is food. . . . particularly in India—food gives us so much more than physical nourishment. It is woven into customs, history, family lore. Through cooking, people demonstrate craft, creativity, love, and pride". And this belief is amply reflected in her fictional narratives where the food and kitchen space become a space for cultural negotiation, identity formation and for the complete expression of the emotions and feelings of her diasporic characters.

One of the most commonly prevalent themes in diasporic fiction revolves around the cultural clashes that the immigrants experience in the host land. The following lines taken from QD describe the dual pulls that Divakaruni's protagonists often find themselves in: "It's one of the primary laws of the universe,' her mother states. '*There is no*

darkness, but light follows. Haven't you heard it?' She hangs up, leaving Rakhi to wonder if this is ancient Indian wisdom or New Age Californian". (Divakaruni 48). When questioned about the multiple narratives in her fiction that are cantered on different sides of the globe, in an interview given to *The Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni responds in the affirmative and states that most of her contemporary work is based on "moving back and forth between India and America, exploring both of the cultures, and the ways in which they are both changing". She explicates further:

And, of course, culture in America is a very complex thing, because so many people have brought their cultures into this land. It always fascinates me the way cultures are different and shape us in different ways, and yet I love discovering things at the heart of each culture that are human and timeless. One of my hopes for all my books is that they will bring people of different cultures together in a common understanding of human frailty, desire, and love – which are all very similar, no matter which culture we are born in.

Divakaruni's fiction is replete with exchanges which display the confusion of people facing cultural clashes and contradictory emotions. Mrs. Gupta, a first-generation immigrant in QD, tries to explain the helplessness and anxiety she felt in the alien country after being uprooted from her original homeland in the following extract: "Dreams would not come to me in California because it was too new a place. Its

people had settled there only a few hundred years ago, and neither its air nor its earth, the elements from which we most draw sustenance, was weighted yet with dreams. Yes, there had been old inhabitants, but they had been driven from the land, and in going had taken with them, along with their hopes, their ways of dreaming". (Divakaruni 177).

The common themes explored in South Asian diasporic literature revolve around questions of identity, race, displacement, marginalization, memory, nostalgia, home and belonging. Most writers, therefore, try to find an answers to questions like Which is my real home? What place do I belong to? Which culture should I follow? What is my authentic self, my real identity? Most of the fictional works of diasporic writers seem to be seeking clarity about these issues. The protagonists, perpetually living with uncertainties and perplexities, having split sensibilities and divided selves are continuously oscillating between the world left behind and the new world ahead of them. Amit Kumar Saha, in his research paper titled *The Spiritual Sense of Alienation in Diasporic Life: Reading Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri*, explicates on the diasporic Indian's preconditioning to dislocation:

Exile plays a pivotal role in both the two great Hindu epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. In fact, the Hindu pantheon of Gods and Goddesses is replete with the concept of mobility symbolized by the deities... The psyche of the Indian immigrant fed on the mythologies of movement and exile is preconditioned to succumb to

the sense of estrangement, alienation, non-belonging, and dislocation at the slightest pretext. Hence, physical displacement is only a catalyst that generally aggravates a pre-existing psychological and spiritual sense of loneliness.... It is because of this complex and apparently paradoxical nature of the exilic condition that it is equated with the postmodern condition. (Saha 2)

Many women diasporic writers have come to the forefront in recent years and their work highlight the plight of the women uprooted from their comfort zones in their original land and trying to carve out a stable rooted identity within the restrictive traditional boundaries and patriarchal mentality. As Veena Noble Dass observes about the commonly prevalent theme explored in the works of most Indian women writers is that of "a search for woman and a quest for the definition of the self in all situations." Meena Alexander in her memoir with a self-explanatory title *Fault Lines*, elaborates on her own dilemma and rootlessness, when she declares, "I am a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing..." (Alexander 3) Writers like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Gita Hariharan are other popular names who have forayed into this category of writing and most of their protagonists find themselves encountering challenges of tradition vs modernity, motherland vs host land and physical journey vs metaphysical journey. They can all, in a way, said to be, "folk historians, myth makers and custodians of the collective history of their peoples." (Pandey 126)

Divakruni, who hails from an elitist traditional Hindu family incorporates lots of her own personal experiences in her fiction as well. In the paper titled *Tierra Encantada: New California and Magic Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices*, the researcher Marta Lysin comments on Divakaruni's craftmanship: " One of several pioneer ethnic American literary frontierswomen fighting with a pen instead of a pistol, Divakaruni rewrites the tradition of Western writing, nuancing the immigrant experience of South Asians in America beyond the expected identities of exclusion, alienation, helplessness and subjugation. " Her own struggle during the initial years of settling down in an alien culture which was poles apart from her native culture, and nothing that her conservative upbringing had prepared her for, and the entire process of discovering strength within oneself, that would enable her to establish herself in the host land and feel comfortable in her own authentic identity – all gets reflected in the fictional world she builds. Commenting on the shock she received in her early years in the US, she reveals to Preeti Zachariah, in an interview: "The world around me was suddenly so different. Immigration was certainly a transformational experience and I tried to explore its intricacies." From staying alone, taking up baby-sitting and other odd jobs at a laboratory and boutique to become financially independent, pursuing her Masters and PhD in English and then settling down with husband and kids – the entire later part of her life has been spent in America. Over the years, she has been actively involved with organizations like MAITRI, which help South Asian women deal with

domestic issues. Her experience with this organization along with other organizations like Pratham and Daya are reflected in her stories. Along with her teaching responsibilities at the University of Houston, she has managed to successfully pursue a writing career as well. Citing writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison Salman Rushdie, Marquez, and Tagore as major literary influences, she has flourished as a diasporic writer and carved a niche for herself. Apart from has venturing into different genres like poetry writing, short stories, children books and e-novel writing, she also makes time to write culinary blogs. A self-confessed foodie, her love for the culinary and the significance she imparts to the culinary space is clearly visible in her works as well as her personal blog.

Just as she has tried multiple genres, she employs multiple strategies such as magic realism, historical narrative, mythical and realistic writing in her works, as she states in an interview with Bookchums, “I was interested in expressing or exploring different things at different stages. First, I was interested in the image, or the experience of the moment, and I wrote poetry. Then I became interested in character growth and narrative, and I wrote short stories. Then I was interested in creating an entire fictional world, so I wrote novels.” (Divakaruni) For Divakaruni, writing was not simply a career option that she pursued, but a way of reconnecting to her original homeland. Recalling her initial days in the US, she mentions how heart-stricken she felt at being cut off from all things familiar and being away from family members. The death of her beloved grandfather, whom she was very

close to, and her inability at that time to reach at his funeral hurt her a lot. She then started writing to keep memories of home and homeland intact and to somehow make peace with the terrible longing she felt for those bygone days. During the writing process, she realized that her distance from her motherland has also given her an objective perspective with which she now viewed her beloved original home. Though she undoubtedly missed it immensely, some of the weaknesses prevalent in her culture were now quite clearly visible to her. As she confesses in her personal blog:

I appreciated the freedom and anonymity of being in a city where only a handful of people knew who I was . . . I missed my family and their sheltering arms so much that it was like having a hole in my heart. I thought about India more than I had ever before. I realized what I appreciated about it – the warmth, the closeness of extended family, the way spirituality pervades the culture. But I also recognized problems about how women are often treated, and a rigid class system because of which many doors are closed to all but the most fortunate and most well-connected people. (Divakaruni)

Divakaruni, who feels she is, “a listener, a facilitator, a connector of people” (qtd. in Miri 83) employs the culinary narrative strategically in her fictional world that mostly revolves around Indian immigrants struggling with dual identities across continents. When questioned about the relevance of food as a subject in Indian fiction, the renowned author Esther David states: “If it is important in cinema, why not in

literature? Look at the best cinema of the world, not India, where most things happen around food. I think, food is an important element of detailing, which can be used in literature and helps even in describing certain characters or differences between characters. It gives colour to situations.". Anita Mannur in her seminal text on the diasporic culinary narrative opines:

Culinary discourse is ambivalently coded and complexly situated; within the tradition of immigrant literature consuming ethically coded food is more than a cultural practice; it is also a standing material in global commerce and exchange. Their life gets split between here and there, right, and wrong and that which is, that which was and that which will never be. In an attempt to hold on to their memories and their past they cling on to things . . . (89)

Blending culinary with the mythic tradition

In her fictional narratives, Divakaruni at times, takes the readers on a culinary narrative journey – woven with timeless tales and ancient anecdotes to highlight the immigrants' experiences with food, initially in their homeland, and later, in the host land. The author also strategically uses the creative form of mythical storytelling to cultivate interest amongst the readers and inspire observation on the nature of the culinary space, and its significant influence on the lives of her diasporic protagonists – individually, socially, and culturally. Literature has always been connected to myths and magic since times immemorial starting from Homer's Iliad to the present times.

Understandably when myths travel from one era to another across generations, enroute they continue to be reshaped and remodified to be better suited for socio-cultural ethos of the times. From Jungian perspective, these are in fact entrenched in the "collective unconscious" of the human mind. It could also be said to be a part of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed as "habitus". In classical Greek, "mythos" signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths are related to social rituals – set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies – but anthropologists disagree as to whether rituals generated myths or myths generated rituals. If the protagonist is a human being rather than a supernatural being, the traditional story is usually not called a myth but a legend. If the hereditary story concerns supernatural beings who are not gods, and the story is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale. [Abrams 170] The New English Dictionary, published in 1888, defines myth as "a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena" (qtd. in Rosenfield

13). In the words of Northrop Frye, myth is "a typical or recurring image . . . a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience" (Anatomy of Criticism 99). In his seminal work, The Golden Bough (1890-1915), James G. Frazer highlights certain mythical patterns that "recur in the legends and ceremonials of diverse and far-flung cultures and religions" (Abrams 23). Divakaruni interweaves epic stories and folktale tradition along with contemporary themes in her fiction and she mentions in an interview how she attempts to glean ideas from her own heritage and blend it with different cultures of the world, : " I am trying to bring together things out of my heritage and actually going back deep into the ancient heritage of Indian literature, as well as the very global and multicultural society in which we live here in American and all over the world. ... I am going back to ancient storytelling forms, like the Panchatantra, the wise animal tales, where all of the animals are telling stories from which everyone in the company can learn." In the novel *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni uses the myth of Tunga-dhwaja's transformation from a king to a beggar to foreshadow the transformation that eventually happens in Mrs. Gupta life, "Transformation is an erratic phenomenon. It strikes people in different ways. Tunga-dhwaja's change was like a tower cracked open by lightning. My own would be slower, subtler, more insidious – a rodent gnawing at the roots of a banyan. But it had begun. (Dreams 262). Sudha and Anju endearingly address the three mothers as their holy trinity – Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Even in her letters to Ashok

from America, Sudha mentions old tales about the mythical "vishkanyaa" and she questions him if he remembers these "women bred on poison, whose kisses brought destruction wherever they went?" She confesses to him that she thinks she is "one of them" (Desire 170). Sudha's makeover, when she attends Mr. Chopra's party along with Anju's family has been described by the author in the following manner, "And here in a home not hers, Sudha, servant girl turned apsara for a night, loveliness for the gods to squabble over." The dream visions that Divakaruni frequently incorporates in her works, are also an intrinsic part of the mythic tradition. As the following extract from MS reveals, the mythic tradition allows her to strategically weave in nuggets of culinary wisdom and carry forward the plot as well:

. . . this fat man in round-rimmed glasses who is telling me I'm all out of *chana besan*. If I wanted, he would see not this old body but what I wished, curve of mango breast to cup in one's palm, long bean line of eucalyptus thigh. I would call on others, *abhrak* and *amlaki*, to remove wrinkles and blacken hair and firm the sagging flesh. And king o fall, makaradwaj rejuvenator whom the Ashiwini Kumar, twin physicians of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers. *Makaradwaj* which must always be used with greatest care for even one measure too much can bring death... (Divakaruni 82-83)

Not only does the passage evoke the nostalgic memory and the emotional connection with the original home culture, but also reiterates

the value of the time-tested anti-aging benefits of ancient herbs associated with Ayurveda and propagated by none other than the renowned healer Dhanvantri, the physician to the gods, as per Hindu mythology.

Divakaruni's narrative techniques used in the selected texts: Divakaruni employs a variety of narrative techniques in keeping with the diverse themes explored in her novels. Along with culinary references, other techniques like the epistolary form, mythological and folkloric narration, symbolism, cultural, legendary references, magic realism and stream of consciousness are used by the author to present the complexities and contradictions that abound in the lives of her fictional characters:

SMH is a bildungsroman novel, a poignant tale of love, loss and longing, spawning the journey of two soul-sisters Anju and Sudha across diverse geographical terrains from rural Bengal to California. Born on the same fateful night in a renowned matriarchal Bengali household the girls are cousins and best friends and share everything from Indian snacks and secrets to fantasies and adventures till the time that their respective traditional 'arranged' marriages tears them apart. The two central characters narrate the story of their lives in their own voices. Be it childhood, adolescence or adulthood, the readers get a glimpse of each of these stages in their lives through their own individual voices, with each chapter alternating between the two characters' lives. Along with the respective journeys of the two

women, the readers are also exposed to the typical Bengali cultural traditions and rituals prevailing during that time. This gem-of-a-novel, replete with ancient mystical elements traces the tumultuous journey of these girls as they face the trial and tribulations that befall them post their marriages. Food memories and food rituals play a crucial role in this mythical, magical tale and gives us a glimpse of how food can be explored as a space of cultural heritage as well as literal rooting.

In VD, this narrative technique continues, and we have the male characters in the novel, namely Anju's husband Sunil and Sudha's suitor Lalit also sharing their perspectives with the readers in their own voices. Also, the epistolary forms and assignment writing techniques have been expertly used by Divakaruni to enable the readers to gauge the inner turmoil and complex workings of each of her main protagonists. Fleeing from her torturous in-laws and the regressive shackles of the traditional middle-class Indian society, Sudha seeks refuge for herself and her baby daughter in the home of her US based bosom friend Anju in the hopes of starting afresh. Elaborate culinary preparations abound in this novel as well and allows us to have a closer look at Divakaruni's use of food and kitchen space as a metaphor – of bonding, healing, and surviving.

QD, in addition to the alternating first person narratives that Divakaruni usually employs in her novels, she has brought in the dream perspective in this novel, where Mrs. Gupta has the exotic vocation being a dream teller, and after her untimely demise, her daughter Rakhi

and her father Mr. Gupta, slowly start translating her dream journals. This enriching translation technique has been woven effectively by the author and as the father daughter duo attempt to make meaning out of each journal entry, piece by piece, the readers get an idea of the true hidden life of Mrs. Gupta, each chapter unfolding, one at a time. Interspersed with memorable anecdotes on the one hand and desperate desires and sharp insights on the other hand, slowly, in small chunks, the readers begin to get an insight into the entire life journey of Mrs. Gupta, her training as a dream interpreter, her rebellious ways, her decision to forsake everything to follow her heart and consequently her husband and abandon her art and home country to her immense regret later on – all the different phases she experiences are delved into through her intermittent journal entries. Published in 2004, this poignant tale is a coming-of-age story that depicts the intergenerational conflicts between the first- and second-generation diasporic community that is an inevitable part of any migratory journey. From culinary preferences to cultural differences – this story is replete with issues that form a part and parcel of the challenging path that befalls the migrants. Whether it is mending personal relationships gone awry, rebuilding the snack shop into a profitable venture, coming to terms with identity issues, strengthening familial bonds or mitigating trauma of losing one's mother and motherland, the food and kitchen space significantly contributes to each of these.

In POI**,** Divakaruni re-envisions the greatest epic stories of all times, the Mahabharata and retells it from the point of view of Draupadi. By

making Draupadi the main authorial voice for narrating the legendary tale from her perspective, the author empowers her woman protagonist and emboldens her to offer her version of the sequence of events. Draupadi thus becomes not merely a marginal character, viewing the ongoing events in a passive spectator like manner but an active doer at the helm of action, initiating and participating in the main events as they unfold, simultaneously creating history. Even though the male characters such as her beloved brother Dhri, her mysterious mentor and friend Krishna, her secret admirer Karna as well as her five distinguished warrior-husbands play an important role in the novel, it is Draupadi's feelings and emotions and opinions that have been delved deeply into. It offers the readers an insight into not just the goings on in the princess destined to create history, but an authentic picture of the condition of the common woman of those times. From queens and princesses to maid servant and dancing girls, the novel gives a slice-of-life experience of the cultural identity, societal expectations, pressures, and privileges of the woman living in those times when the epic is narrated through a woman's voice. It is interesting to note that apart from her other accomplishments it is her culinary prowess that plays a pivotal role in bringing about the transformation from the naïve, sheltered Princess Panchaali in her childhood to the sophisticated Queen Draupadi who becomes capable of taking the reins in her hands and changing "the course of history".

BVG – Written in the form of a novel in series, this is an intergenerational saga encompassing different locations and revolving

around three strong women, related to each other but set apart from each other by destiny. As the chapters describe the journey of each of these resilient women across ages, generations and continents set in diverse terrains – from rural Bengal to contemporary Houston, the narrative voices keep switching accordingly. As all three of them belong to three different generation, so the narrative style is such that it corresponds to the age, background, socio-cultural milieu of each one of them. As all three face extremely challenging situations in their personal lives, it is very interesting to note that though the challenges are simultaneously different yet equally burdensome irrespective of which generation the woman belongs to. Through the lives of the women Durga, Savitri, Bela, and Tara – great grandmother, grandmother, mother and daughter, the novel explores the complexity of multigenerational diasporic relationships. Not the stereotypical epitomes of feminine Indian virtues, these women are as manipulative, resourceful and cunning as any other flawed human. The culinary motif has been effectively used not only to help the women regain their identity and re- establish themselves in society but also to forge a connection between the lost ancestral values of the motherland and as a space where the diasporic community members are able to renew their ties with the original culture and in the process heal and empower themselves.

OG – Spawning two continents and families. this multifaceted novel comprises of diverse themes such as mystery, suspense, love, cultural crisis, and identity issues. Also, we have shifting narratives by

different characters each depicting different cross section of the society – first person narrative is used for the main protagonist, eighteen-year-old Korobi representing the contemporary young Indian girl's voice. Her fiancée Rajat who represents the elitist young mens club, his chauffer who comes from a low middle class Muslim society and Korobi's grandmother who represents the traditional Brahminical affluent cultural Bengali society – all three of them have been described through third person narrative. So, we see that using different narrative voices for characters coming from varied generation, religions, and class help. The novel is replete with culinary references which are used not only to carry forward the subplot but also to operate as markers of social status and class. Ranging from lower middle working class, typical traditional Brahminical class, elitist modern society to diasporic Indian community – cuisines representing all of these are interspersed in the story. The culinary spread laid out by the author offers us the chance to sample and savour the varied flavors of different cross-sections of the society and analyse the same embed those characters deeply in the readers mind and provides comprehension about their unique position in society and the unique privilege and challenges and faced by each of them.

MS – A novel that needs no introduction, MS is an enchanting tale of love and loss among the diasporic community based in America. Adapted into a movie starring the popular Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai, this mystical, magical gem of a novel gives us glimpses of the trials and tribulations faced by Indian Americans. Uniquely

written with a blend of prose and poetry, the story revolves around Tilottama – a gifted Indian American grocery store owner who uses spices to mitigate the aliments that plague the diasporic community members visiting her store. Spices are used not just to cure physical maladies, but also to alleviate the trauma that the uprooted, alienated, homesick immigrants undergo in the challenging, hostile environs of the adopted country. From elaborate explanations regarding the inherent 'powers' of the spices, to the evocative descriptions of cooking practices and other culinary rituals – the culinary semiotic is used here as an empowering space for the diasporic community

Memories and the Culinary Space

In Divakaruni's fiction, the smells and taste associated with bygone culinary memories don't just evoke nostalgia but accelerate the assimilation process in the host country as well. When Divakaruni incorporates food and food images in her fictional works, it serves different purposes at the same time. At a literal level it engages the readers completely; drawing them into the visually appealing treat, whetting their appetites – for the taste and memories associated with the food items of their original country. In the following extract from MS, childhood memories are evoked through the culinary items displayed in the store:

… This is what the customers see as they enter, ducking under plastic-green mango leaves strung over the door for luck: a bent woman with skin the colour of old sand, behind a glass counter that holds *mithai*

sweets out of their childhoods. Out of their mothers' kitchens. Emerald-green burfis, rasogullahs white as dawn, and, made from lentil flour, *laddus* like nuggets of gold. It seems right that I should have been here always, that I should understand without words their longing for the ways they choose to leave behind when they chose America. Their shame for that longing, like the bitter slight aftertaste in the mouth when one has chewed *amlaki* to freshen the breath . . . (Divakaruni 4-5)

The scene takes back the characters in place and time by triggering the wonderful, cherished memories of their long-lost home. In "One Reader's Digest: Towards a Gastronomic Theory of Literature," Brad Kessler explicates on this aspect of food; how writers use culinary motif to create different moods and evoke certain emotions. According to him, "Meals are magnets; they draw people together. They are drama, in fiction as in life" (153). Before delving deep into culinary memories, let us first look at the word memory, the different meanings attributed to it, especially in the diasporic context. Jon D. Holzman defines memory as something that "ties anthropology to history, and in a different sense psychology" (362). Offering a neuroscientific perspective, Tzofit Ofengenden comments that memory is not, "a literal reproduction of the past, but instead an ongoing constructive process. Memories are modified and reconstructed repeatedly" (34). Regarding memories**,** Vijay Agnew writes, **"**Memories ignite our imaginations and enable us to vividly recreate our recollections of home (…) memories can be nostalgically evocative (…) as an antidote to the struggles of the

present. Others who had wounds of memory (…) may find travels to the past an involuntary, albeit necessary, journey to come to terms with the present selves."(10) The significance of memory and the role it plays in recalling the picture of the original home to the immigrant mind can be understood from the following lines, "The power of the moment is not realized in the immediate perception but only later in the imagination. The epiphanic imagination fills in the details that memory neglects and creates a unit of fragmentary 'dead' details from the past" (Nicholas 74) Memory plays a special role in the lives of diasporic community members who must undergo the traumatic experience of displacement and rootlessness. The Freudian perspective on trauma and memory can be applicable in the case of the alienated and isolated migrants as well and his definition of mourning as a ". . . reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken place, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on" (243) holds true within the diasporic context. The displaced immigrants are mourning for the loss of their original home and culture and are haunted by nostalgic memories associated with their homeland. Along with cultural aspects like manner of dressing, language, and customs, it is also the culinary space that helps the 'mourning' immigrants to some extent to reduce the trauma and try and adapt themselves as per the expected norms and traditions followed in the new country. Culinary memories – recipes, practices and rituals imbibed from the home country contribute significantly in reducing the stress and trauma levels and in providing a stable comfort zone in

which recovery and healing takes place. Jasbir Jain elaborates on how writers like Chitra Banerjee and Jhumpa Lahiri navigate dual cultures and effectively use memory: “Writers who have moved way from one culture to another are caught between two cultures and are very often engaged either in process of self-recovery through resort to history and memory or in a process of self-preservation through an act of transformation” (101).

The connection between culinary and traumatic memories, which is not only limited to diasporic situation, is effectively explored by Divakaruni through the lives of her protagonists. In QD, when Rakhi feels completely lost and abandoned after her mother’s fatal accident, the memory of the cinnamon peel is used effectively to evoke the feeling of fond remembrance and yearning for the lost times. her feelings of being lost in time and space have been beautifully evoked in the lines: “When she opens the door, the room smells of cinnamon peel. But then she takes another, deeper breath, and there’s no smell. Did she only imagine the spice odour? She’s losing faith in her senses, their ability to evaluate accurately the world around her.” (Divakaruni 119). The food motif is used strategically to delve deep into the psychological world of Rakhi, who along with being a single mother is now feeling doubly burdened as being left with a single parent as well. In OG, during the engagement party, when Mrs. Bhattacharya divulges certain unpleasant facts about Rajat’s past misdeeds, Korobi’s behaviour is effectively depicted by her culinary choices as well as the lack of it. Even though she is surrounded by turbaned waiters with

silver trays offering sumptuous culinary delights, Korobi confesses that she cannot eat. “that awful woman has stolen my (her) appetite.” (Divakaruni 27) And though she has never tasted alcohol, the emotional meltdown she is undergoing in the midst of the sophisticated world of the Boses, that is quite a shocking change from her traditional, conservative upbringing, along with the unexpected presence of the ex-girlfriend that is followed by the harsh revelations made by a gossipy socialite about her husband-to-be, she decides to take recourse to drinks for the first time in her life. Rajat suggests the mild pina-colada, but after a few rounds of the sweet, pineapple flavoured drink, he asks her to switch to quiche instead. The pressure of accumulated stress, the unanswered questions, her anxiety regarding the drastic change in lifestyle – all together have become too much to bear for Korobi and her emotional, psychological, high-strung state has been effectively reflected here as she suffers from loss of appetite and indulges in alcohol in an attempt to release some of her pent-up emotions.

The inextricable link between food and body is undeniable and in Divakaruni’s works there are many instances where the food patterns of the protagonists have a direct impact on their physical attributes. In BVG, Bela Dewan’s emotionally unstable state during her post-divorce traumatic phase is revealed through her eating pattern. When her friendship with her new white neighbour Kenneth starts blossoming, and she feels better and productive, her creative culinary preparations and good appetite reflects the same. As Kenneth observes, she is

changing for the better and the improvement also is visible in her physical transformation.

In the novel *Vine of Desire*, we see Anju's physical transformation from a skinny person to a more filled out medium weight one corresponds to her depressed state and her state of recovery. And Sudha's culinary contribution plays a significant role in this. The following lines from Andrea Adolph's work *Food and Feminity in Twentieth-century British Women's Fiction*, elaborate on Schilder's concept of the body image and the mind-body relationship:

The body image stresses the interconnectedness of the mind and the body and presents individuals as gestalts of their physical and mental spheres. To discuss "the body," then, is to speak of more than flesh, but of intellectual activities of individuals as well. ... The body is the medium for all human expression and for human interpretation of the nexus of cultural and material experience. Michel Foucault delineates the body's textuality from its experience by suggesting two registers of embodiment: "a useful body and an intelligible body" (Discipline 136).

Conditioning about culinary hospitality is also part of the legacy that Divakaruni's diasporic characters carry with them from their country of origin, and it is interesting to note how she incorporates the same in her stories**.** In certain societies, there are prescribed norms that are to be followed by the women in the household to offer hospitality to the guests. Kathryn S. March, in her essay *Hospitality, women, and the efficacy of beer,* discusses the formal practices and ritual that women

employ while honoring guests at home, especially on special occasions. Not just the act of assembling, placing the offerings and serving the guests that matters, but also "the gestures, body movements, and language that accompany the hospitality" that are to be taken care of. These are "highly formalized, and they evoke some of the basic imagery of hospitality for both Sherpa and Tamang. Offerings should be made with the right hand extended, the left hand touching the right elbow, body and head inclined slightly forward. Honorific, even archaic, language should be used." (Counihan 56) The dynamics of the culinary space have also been used strategically to reflect Rakhi's relationship with her ex-husband Sonny and also the extent to which she identifies with a traditional Indian woman's desire please her man through food. When Rakhi reminisces about the bygone early married days, her adoration and attraction for him is indirectly conveyed through the culinary presentations she indulges him in, as she reflects on those memories from their happier days together; days when "she still cooked elaborate meals – appetizers, rotis rolled out fresh, rich curries in almond sauce, traditional Indian desserts that required hours of culinary acrobatics." (Divakaruni 12) Rakhi's keen observation about the minutest details regarding Sonny's culinary behaviour also symbolizes the utter devotion that she felt towards him during the initial phase of their married life: "He took small bites of the Sandesh she had made . . . He was careful to brush the sweet white crumbs from his fingers between bites. It never ceased to amaze her that a man like

him, so Dionysian in his appetites, should have such dainty table manners." (Divakaruni 12)

As Roland Barthes opines about food in *Mythologies* (1957), "Its is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour." Using the example of steak, he makes a distinction between its limiting *denotative* meaning and the wider *connotative* meaning comprising of the socio-cultural, political aspects woven around it. Describing how certain specific food items cutting across class and regional barriers become edible metaphors for the national community, Barthes emphasizes on the underlying connection between the culinary identity and national identity and how the connotative aspect of the culinary generates other significant layers of meaning. The following lines about business lunch bear testimony to the fact that he considered the culinary to be one of the most central aspects of societal behaviour in the modern times: "To eat is a behaviour that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signalling other behaviors . . . What are these other behaviors? Today we might say all of them: activity, works, sports, effort, leisure, celebration – every one of these situations is expressed through food. We might almost say that this 'polysemia' of food characterizes modernity". (Barthes, 1997: 25)

"Polysemia" implies the ability to possess more than one semiotic or symbolic meaning at the same time and Divakaruni's fictional world effectively depicts this aspect of food. From having clear and specific meanings to subliminally suggesting subtle truths, the food motif has been used a tool to convey not just the story at hand but also to bring awareness about many universal themes. In QD, Sonny's close culinary connection with his ex-mother-in-law depicts the underlying strong bond between the two and is open to other multiple interpretations. He feels that she is the best cook in the world and so every week, even after being divorced from Rakhi, he continues to visit Mrs. Gupta bearing gifts such as exotic organic vegetables, CDs of Hindi movies and assists them in any way possible by doing errands for them. Mrs. Gupta amply rewards him with her culinary 'presents'- "care packages filled with his favorite gourmet dishes – palak panner, tandoori chicken, pooris – items that take hours of preparation time." (Divakaruni 29). Sonny's fondness for Mrs. Gupta and his culinary and emotional dependence on her can be analysed through the lens of Barthes theory. From finding solace for his deep rooted insecurity and feeling of attachment to a 'mother figure' to establishing a strong culinary bond with his motherland – the food motif signifies all this and more. Talking about food in French society, Barthes opines, "food is also charged with signifying the situation in which it is used. It has a twofold value, being nutrition as well as protocol, and its value as protocol becomes increasingly more important as soon as the basic

needs are satisfied . . . *food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation.*" (Barthes 34)

It is this 'signified situation', so to speak, that Rakhi is so envious about. On the physical, literal level of course, Rakhi is irritated by this intimate bond between the two and rebukes her mother over showering Sonny with elaborate culinary delicacies while fixing her only instant quick fix meals when she visits home. But on the deeper level, her own feelings of childhood insecurity about not being cherished and not being close enough to her mother as well her motherland are triggered by this 'situation' created by this culinary display of affection between her ex-husband and her mother, and it is this that is what she really resents and rebels against. In VD, food as a metaphor takes on multiple dimensions evoking contrary emotions such as attraction and repulsion, loss and gain, craving and satiety, affection and distrust. When Sudha comes to stay with Sunil and Anju, the food and kitchen space becomes a space where frenzied energy crackles all the time, mirroring the obsessive attraction that Sunil still has for her.

As the above-mentioned illustrations from the chosen texts reveal, Divakaruni engages with the conflicting, contesting culinary space from multi-layered perspectives where food is not just something to be consumed, but has transformed into a language, a communication that conveys powerful emotions and comprises of hidden meanings.

Childhood Memories and Recipes

Adapting one's taste buds according to one's geographical location is an important step in one's overall adaptation to the culture of the host country as cuisine, culinary and culture are interconnected. Regarding the recipes that abound in her novels, one can see how Divakaruni incorporates those at critical moments in her stories, and their strategical positioning enables the readers to experience various emotions. Recently it is being acknowledged that food is indeed as much about reviving and preserving childhood or bygone memories as it is about cooking rituals and ingredients. In an interview given to Times of India, food expert and author Sadia Delhi says, "Food is as much about memories as it is about spices and recipes. Comfort food is usually what you have grown up eating." This could be the reason for an increasing awareness about preserving traditional family recipes. Jack Goody, in his article "*The recipe, the prescription, and the experiment*" elaborates on the how the recipe is not simply a set of instructions for preparing dishes, but it reflects specific cultural traits as well. Commenting on the appeal of regional recipes, he states that "it is tied to what grandmother did ('*les gaufres de meme'*) and to the 'natural' ingredients she used rather than to the recipes. Regarding Taste Memory, Molly O'Neill asserts that "scientists suspect that taste and memory are inextricably bound" and establishing a further connection, she states that the "primitive brain" which can also be defined as the "seat of instinct and memory", is affected by taste. In QD, Rakhi's statement to her mother that "as long as there's fresh

bread in this world, things can't be beyond repair", conveys her fondness, attachment to the American culinary item and the positive vibes she associates it with (Divakruni 22).

The bread semiotics thus conveys the larger issue within the diasporic context. While for the first-generation settler Mrs Gupta, it is authentic Indian cuisine that refreshes and rejuvenates her, in the case of her daughter, the second-generation migrant Rakhi, it is bread that is her go to 'comfort food'. This is also symbolic of her near complete identification with the American culinary preference. Though her mother nods her head in response, Rakhi is acutely aware of what she really feels about this, as she can read her eyes which convey, "My poor Rakhi, to place so much belief in bread! (Divakruni 22). This exchange depicts not only the culinary preference of different generation but also the symbolic associations that accompany the cuisine. Her belief that if fresh bread is available, all other challenges and struggles of the world can be handled, conveys her utter dependence on the popular American staple snack. From the Barthesian lens, the culinary preference semiotically evokes the generational differences and delineates the phases in the life cycle of a diasporic subject.

In an article, *How cooking with my Mom as a child made me a better parent*, Divakaruni mentions one of her fondest childhoods growing up memories back in India which comprised of her cooking pakoras along with her mother on monsoon afternoons. The emotion of familial love

and togetherness blended with taste and warmth under the backdrop of the sound of rain and lightning evokes the deeper nostalgia for the individual's search for safety and solace and she later admits that those vegetable fritters were her "comfort food" that made her appreciative and grateful that she had a home where she was "loved and protected". She then goes on to describe the very elaborate process of making pakoras from scratch from overnight soaking the lentils, grinding, and slicing the numerous ingredients, frying the fritters to finally making sure that the kitchen was spotlessly clean after the entire cooking process was over. She reminisces how the culinary space also became the site where the traditional Indian cultural traits were also passed on during these pakora-making sessions as is revealed in these lines about her mother: "she believed that teaching me to do things the "honorable" way would help me succeed in a society that viewed a household without a father as shameful. . . my mother wanted me to demand perfection of myself. She thought praise made children soft, unable to handle the difficulties of the world." The kitchen space is utilized by her mother to impart cultural and culinary values and the author also continues this tradition with her sons, as she tries to incorporate the previous generation's parenting strategies to the best of her abilities.

As Annam Ragamalika opines in her thesis *Intoning Culture, Gender and Space in the Diaspora: A Study of Select culinary Narratives by Women*: "The imperative role of identity building happens in the kitchen space and it is achieved through food that is cooked using

conventional recipes." (67) The childhood memories still resonate with her and even though her culinary attempts may not be as time consuming and cumbersome as her mothers, the modified version of the traditional recipe still works well with her young boys. Instead of soaking lentils overnight and then grinding it the next day, she uses readymade lentil flour; potatoes, onions and pumpkin are replaced by the nutritious spinach and to avoid excess oil, the pakoras are drained on paper towels after they have been fried. The spices, red chilli, cumin and coriander powders are retained as in the original recipe. By adapting the traditional recipe to suit the modern times, the author is successful in reviving and preserving the culinary and cultural connection with her mother and motherland for the second-generation diasporic community members – namely her sons, as well.

As a historian of American eating habits, Donna R Gabaccia writes in his essay, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, "Human eating habits originate in a paradoxical, and perhaps universal, tension between a preference for the culinarily familiar and the equally human pursuit of pleasure in the forms of culinary novelty, creativity, and variety." [Americans 6] Further, the author seeks to establish a connection between culinary and linguistic traits as these are the first two cultural traits that human beings learn. Just as people find it impossible to lose their accents even after picking up new languages; in the same manner, "the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort." [6] Elaborating on the intangible memories associated with food, the author opines, that it is

these that "[…] immigrants often sought with their food. They sought to recouple what had come uncoupled over fifty years: food, identity, and community." [176] Most of the early immigrants to America, found it very difficult to let go of their own culinary practices, and food traditions to adopt the American food practices because they felt that would imply, abandoning their own, "community, family, and religion". [54]

In BVG, Bela reveals how she loved visiting Durga Sweets because of the smells of sugar, saffron and chocolates wafting in it, "like a festival" [Goddess 194]. The first-generation Indian immigrants are naturally bound to have more attachment for and involvement with the culinary traditional patterns followed back home, as their sensory and emotional memory is inextricably linked to that and Divakaruni uses food motif to depict intergenerational conflicts /exchanges within the diasporic background. It is usually seen that the first-generation settlers are more attached to the cuisine of their original homeland, while the second-generation settlers are fonder of the American cuisine. Stephen Gill has opined: "A key characteristic of diaspora is that a strong sense of connection to a homeland is maintained through cultural practices and ways of life" (Sarangi 2009 83) In QD, Rakhi as a youngster did not like Indian food much and clearly stated her preference for American food. In BVG too, the second-generation girl Tara has not learnt to cook authentic Bengali cuisine even though her mother is quite a good cook. The original recipes are usually quite time consuming and tough to prepare. Also, as the second generation is

regularly exposed to wide variety of American cuisine, those choices get reflected in the kitchen space as well. Even some ingredients are replaced, and recipes are modified, and new food and cooking practices begin to be followed resulting in culinary fusion which is a combination of traditional and continental food. As Ketu Katrak opines, "A recipe has so many different hands and minds in its history. I cannot recall who taught me what, and what parts I invented. That is boundary less pleasure of cooking; no one authorship. What counts is the final taste." (271) In his much-acclaimed essay "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" Barthes asserts that food is a type of communication, a "grammar of foods," and claims that "communication always implies a system of signification".

In BVG, Sanjay Dewan's cake-less childhood memories play a significant role in spurring his ambitious streak and ultimately in his rising career graph. As an orphan back home in India, he faced harsh step-motherly treatment at the hands of his relatives and when his rich cousin's birthdays were grandly celebrated, he was purposely kept out of the parties and fed only the remaining scraps. Starved, literally for acceptance and for the sumptuous culinary delicacies, his childhood fantasies revolved around making it big and eating the best food available: "mutton pastries from New Market, shrimp cutlets from Bhabanipur, three kinds of ice cream from Magnolia's, a Flory's fruitcake big as a table. Foods, that he'd only heard of . . . He would invite his uncle and his cousins and especially his aunt and force them to eat until they got sick from it, the too-rich food, and his too-much

success." (Divakaruni 164) Thus the food semiotic is employed by the author to depict that right from childhood, for Sanjay it is the 'signified' value of rich food that becomes synonymous with great success and his starvation for material success has its origin in the forced culinary abstinence during his struggling days. And later in the novel when tables turn in his favour and immense fortune is bestowed upon him, his wife Bela makes up for his bygone impoverished birthdays by churning out the most elaborate cakes with painstaking efforts and throwing the most memorable parties to make him feel special and loved. Food cravings and hunger pangs in his childhood are symptomatic of the neglect and step-motherly treatment meted out to him, and the post marriage sumptuous culinary indulgences reveal how coveted, cherished he is and the central position he occupies in his family now. The novel QD also is replete with different significations of food. Breakfast, lunches, and dinners play a pivotal role in the story as active agents in increasing intimacy and bonding between the two couples – Belle and Jespal, Rakhi, and Sonny. Preparing and consuming traditional Indian food together as a family not just strengthens familial bonds but also builds a strong sense of identity, much needed in the alien culture. Western, fusion cuisine on the other hand is depicted as being dangerous and toxic, as can be seen in the case of the manager of Rakhi's competitive café. When the Java manager offers beverages to the trio – Rakhi, her mother and Belle, Rakhi's mother intervenes and exchanges her drink with Rakhi, gulps down a few sips grimacing all the way, before quickly exiting. It is

insinuated that the drink was as toxic as the personality of the manager and so Mrs. Gupta's maternal instinct, in a way saves Rakhi from the harmful 'ingredients 'or 'vibes'. It is an unfortunate coincidence that within a few days of consuming the beverage, Mrs. Gupta meets with a fatal accident. The culinary semiotic has been effectively employed in the novel and one can see numerous instances where this can be observed. On the one hand accepting food from well-wishers enhances friendship and builds trust as is reflected in the relationships between father and daughter and the Kurma house owners and customers. And on the other rejecting food reveals the perceived threat and disgust as in the case of Mrs. Gupta refusing the complimentary cookies offered by the Java manager.

One day Mrs. Gupta retorts that growing up Rakhi categorically showed her preference to Western cuisine over Indian culinary preparations and so she has no reason now to complain. Anita Mannur mentions an anecdote where she reveals how Indianized spicy yellow fish sandwiches made by her mother in her childhood days became her comfort food during her later years. (Introduction 210**)** How our childhood culinary memories provide a source of comfort to us even during our adult lives, especially in a diasporic setting is explored in an article titled *Eating Different, Looking Different: Food in Asian American Childhood* written by Lan Dong, where she discusses about the culinary experiences of Jade Snow, a fifth Chinese daughter born in America to immigrant parents. Describing Snow's childhood food-related activities, Dong states,

"Food and proper food preparation appear to be significant ways of fulfilling Jade Snow's duty as a filial and well-behaved Chinese American daughter. When, as a teenager, she moves out of her parents' house to pursue her college education, her ability to entertain her American acquaintances with homemade Chinese food proves to be an important means by which she establishes her social life beyond the confines of the Chinese American community." (Dong, 139)

In QD, Rakhi's mood turns dark when she realizes that the recipes that Sonny has used to prepare those dishes belong to her mother. Extremely angry and unable to digest the close intimate bond Sonny shared with her mother, she bursts forth in fury. The culinary possessiveness that she displays regarding the ownership that she feels she ought to have inherited over her mother's culinary skills is symbolic of the neediness and yearning she has since childhood for her mother as well as her motherland. Her feeling of incompleteness could be because of being deprived of strong maternal bond and her feeling of incompetency at not having understood her mother enough and of her not being important enough in her mother's life. In her blog, Divakruni shares with her readers three elaborate Indian recipes of – pakoras, chocolate Sandesh and mango ice cream; dishes that have been mentioned in her novel BVG, which spans the journey of three generations of Bengali immigrant family. She mentions at the outset how family recipes are modified according to the lifestyle requirements of each family member and how she, in her personal life, follows similar practice of passing on the culinary legacy to her kids, "Food is

important in all families, probably, but crucial in immigrant families. We often pass on traditions along with recipes. My mother did that, and I think I do it, too, with my sons." So, her readers get an interesting perspective on the authentic culinary preparations and as the recipes are related to the plot and protagonists in the novel, the intimacy of the readers with the text is also enhanced.

As stated by in the essay titled *Delicious Supplements: Literary Cookbooks as Additives to Children's Texts*, on the influence of children's literature-based cookbooks and how these cookbooks: ". . . ultimately expand children's perspectives, including that of their palate. It allows them to indirectly consume the book. By reproducing recipes that are connected to characters, readers can get the sense of becoming one with text.... A sense of power derives from using your imagination as a reader and a cook. (Keeling and Pollard 36) Divakaruni also invited the renowned Bengali cookbook author Sandeep a Datta to share some of the elaborate recipes that were included in her novel OG.

Renowned oral historian Aanchal Malhotra explains the significance of preserving the past and the immense loss that the new generation will suffer in case they do not hold on to their cultural heritage, "perhaps we are forgetting about this very heritage, this gloriously rich culture, this long history. Maybe we take it for granted, but we are forgetting how to hold onto the minor aspects of life inherent to society; those that bind us to others – conversations, feelings, memories, family,

collective histories, community." She advises the common people, especially the youth to proactively make efforts to "become memory keepers of our everyday, to chronicle the passing of time, the banal, the changing nature of society." And Divakaruni has ably depicted in her works how culinary memories that are an integral part of our collective histories are preserved and passed on from one generation to the other. Esther David, winner of the Sahitya Academy award, made an observation in an interview that food which was cooked with good intentions and love can transform it magically and heal relationships. She also bemoans the loss of pride associated with "traditional or ritualists food" in modern Indian society and feels sorry that in the craze for following western cuisines, people are slowly forgetting to make their own original dishes. She expresses shock over the fact that even during traditional festivals, people have started substituting *mithai* with chocolates and she advises such people to indulge in global cuisines all they like, but not at the expense of ignoring their own rich culinary legacy.

Memories: Culinary and Cultural

The French anthropologist Levi-Strauss formulated the 'culinary triangle' theory where in the cooking process was looked at as a system within a triangular semantic boundary. Along with elaborating upon various types of techniques involved, roasting, smoking, boiling to name a few, Strauss also highlighted the significance of various diachronic as well as oppositional factors such as nature and culture,

presence and absence, revered and taboo, asserting that "we can hope to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure" (1965 [ET 1997], 35). Divakaruni, employs the culinary motif to not only carry forward the plots and give an insight into the psychology of her characters, but also to effectively express societal and cultural configurations prevalent in India and America. In her interview given to *Smithsonian* talks about her creative input which straddles between Indian and American culture and her desire to make readers aware of the underlying commonalities between cultures across the world.

It always fascinates me the way cultures are different and shape us in different ways, and yet I love discovering things at the heart of each culture that are human and timeless. One of my hopes for all my books is that *they will bring people of different cultures together in a common understanding* of human frailty, desire, and love – which are all very similar, no matter which culture we are born in.

In BVG, when Tara comes up with a suggestion for a beach picnic, Mrs. Mehta reminisces about elaborate picnics back home in India, "excursions with carloads of provisions: potato curry, puris, jalebis for dessert, countless thermos flasks full of tea, a goat for the grandmother, who had to have fresh milk.". However, when she is informed that there would be the simplest culinary fare possible, namely bread, cheese, and salad, she accepts the changed reality and understands that she is "in America now." (Divakaruni 65). Both these

instances are symbolic of the culinary tradition associated with eastern and western cultures. The food semiotic here is used to highlight the differences between the two – in India, picnic is a sought-after leisure activity for which culinary preparation and planning starts much in advance, while in the USA, instant, quick fix, ready- to-eat snacks suffice. Mrs. Mehta's bygone culinary memories symbolize the nostalgic yearnings and craving for the home and homeland experienced by most diasporic subjects. Avtar Brah expresses his views about the constructive aspect of the diasporic experience. he opines, "The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble, and reconfigure" (190). Regarding the insecurity felt by first generation diasporic Indians about the inability of the highly "Americanised" second generation to maintain the sanctity and their traditional Indian culture and identity, Shamita Das Dasgupta in *Gender roles and cultural continuity in the Asian Indian immigrant community in the US* opines:

Consequently, their foremost challenge has become the successful transfer of culturally significant behaviors as well as identity to a generation of young adults reared in the US. Consequently, groups and subgroups based on language, caste, cultures, and religion have been formed in the community to encourage and *sponsor esoteric practices*

among the members and instill these values in the second generation. (954) (my emphasis)

As far as transferring cultural traits along with culinary tastes to the next generation is concerned, Divakaruni follows the footsteps of her mother. She has confessed many a times that she tries to interweave stories during her kitchen conversations with her sons and she tries to emulate her mother's strategies in doing so. In the article**,** *how cooking with my Mom as a child made me a better parent***,** Divakaruni reveals how she has modified the traditional Indian recipes and culinary methods passed on to her by her mother to suit the needs of her American born sons. Not only that, but she also confesses that her parenting style also has been tweaked quite a bit to ensure that the Indian cultural values are carried forward to the next generation and she feels that blending culinary sessions with storytelling strategies plays a significant role in this, as is revealed in her own words: "Food. It's how we pass on so much to our children: culture, memories, ways of being in the world. . . . the most important thing my mother taught me: Mingle stories and memories with love and learning. That's what really nourishes you. What makes you strong."

When questioned about her own culinary skills in one of her interviews revolving around her novel *Before we visit the goddess*, she admits candidly, "Alas, as my long-suffering family will testify, I am much better at writing about delicious food than creating it. I am more like the granddaughter, Tara – my goal is to get from chopping board to

dining table in 20 minutes! I do like to cook, but very sporadically. I am fond, however, of creating new recipes – some of these are on my blog. But the many failures – well, we won't talk about those!" In her study titled *Intoning Culture, Gender, and Space in the Diaspora: A Study of Select culinary Narratives by Women,* the researcher Annam Ragamalika opines that "… often the notion of the unattainable parent land is obtained through the culinary space at the adopted country. Therefore, the loss of home country and the nostalgia associated with it is partly rectified by cooking cuisine of one's own culture." [58].

In the novel *Before we visit the Goddess*, Divakaruni describes how Bela Dewan who can resurrect her life by resurrecting her culinary skills hankers after the bygone memories of her original home country. Towards the end of the novel, when she spends few days reconciling with her daughter, she comes across an old photograph taken from her old apartment in Kolkata. When her daughter Tara questions her regarding what she was staring at so intensely in that photograph, she replies that she was waiting "for the jhal-muri man. According to her, he made the "best puffed-rice snacks" and she expresses her disappointment over the fact that in spite of her amazing cooking skills, she has "never been able to replicate" that particular snack. As she humorously declares, "probably the special tase came from Kolkata dust!" [Goddess 194] Even after so many years of being away from India and having established herself as a well-known cooking expert, she still reminisces about the unique taste of the street side vendors of

her parent country. Later she reveals to her daughter that her own mother's shop Durga Sweets was considered to be one of the most famous sweet shops in Kolkata, and "the bigger confectioners were always trying to steal" her mother's recipes. But she believes firmly that they would not be able to replicate the same taste even if they had got their hands on the recipe because it was not the recipe that gave the unique tase to her signature sweets, but it was her mother's "special touch" known as " haater-gun" in Bengali. Even after all these decades spent in an advanced modern country like the US and having written cookbooks and hosted cooking shows for western audiences, Bela still believes in the traditional idea based in her ancestral country regarding the culinary essence, namely that even though the ingredients and the recipe used undoubtedly play an important role in the culinary preparation, it is the personal touch of the individual which gives a special, distinct flavour and that is something that cannot be replicated. Divakaruni thus strategically uses the culinary semiotic to evoke cultural memories related to the "haater-gun' as well. Floyd and Forster opines on the connection between recipe and cultural history: "the recipe, in its intertextuality, is also itself a narrative which can engage the reader or cook in a 'conversation' about culture and history in which the recipe and its context provide part of the text and the reader imagines (or even eats) the rest." In 'Culture is Ordinary', Raymond Williams explores the different meanings of the word 'culture' and elaborates on the various ways in which culture can be (re)produced. Describing the experience he had at the tea shop during

his stay in Cambridge, he elaborates on the manner in which food space is a space heavily loaded with cultural connotations:

I was not oppressed by the university, but the teashop, acting as if it were one of the older and more respectable departments, was a different matter. Here was culture, not in any sense I knew, but in a special sense: the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people. They were not, the great majority of them, particularly learned; they practised few arts; but they had it, and they showed you they had it . . . (Williams, 1993:7) (Ashley, Hollows and Taylor 9)

In the thesis *An Appetite for Metaphor: Food Imagery and Cultural identity in Indian Fiction* the researcher Jennifer Burcham Whitt comments on how in her own life memories are strongly linked to the culinary: “As I have aged. however, the richness of the beans has grown beyond the flavour of the vegetable to the meaningful representations I have come to associate with the pinto bean. It is just one small vegetable, but it is more than substance to me; beans now seem to carry a wide range of emotions, trigger memories form the past, and connect me to my family through common social history and celebration of the bean.”[Whitt 1]She wholeheartedly accepts the huge influence food has on her life as she elaborates on the significant place the humble *pinto beans* occupy in her life right from her childhood days where she partook of not-so-lavish meals prepared at her home and slowly how her family tradition of a love of beans impacted her as

well. Pamela Goyan Kittler, Kathryn P. Sucher, Marcia Nelms reflects on the connection of food with cultural identity by stating that foods that "demonstrates affiliation with a culture are usually introduced during childhood and are associated with security or good memories." (4)

Divakaruni's works are replete with such passages that reflect the symbiotic relationship between the culinary identity and cultural identity. In Sister of my Heart, Anju and Sudha's close connection and soul sister bonding is manifested through various such memories collected over their years of growing up together. Whether the two girls are sharing dresses, jewellery, fantasies or worries in the ancestral mansion of the legendary Chatterjee family, the culinary presence always makes its way into each of these situations – be it eating pani-puris and drinking Jal jeera water from street vendors outside their school or the lavish spread comprising of authentic Bengali dishes laid out during their wedding ceremonies. Even for the bridal preparations for these two, the beauty regimen began with eating milk-soaked almonds supposedly to improve their "dispositions and our (their) complexions" (Heart 108). Of course, later in the day, few hours are exclusively dedicated to perfecting their culinary skills, as that was undoubtedly one of the most important skills to be acquired to achieve marital success. From impossible to duplicate elaborate Bengali desserts such as 'gopal-bhog' and 'pati-shapta', the brahmin lady who was hired by the Chatterjee matriarchs also gave them "lessons in the complex laws of orthodox Hindu cuisine: milk and meat products must

not be mixed. Non-vegetarian items must never be used when serving food." (Heart 109). During the bride viewing session with the Sanyals, Sudha is questioned by Ramesh's mother about her knowledge of the exact proportion of "sugar to water in rasogulla syrup". (Heart 123) The food semiotic establishes the deep-rooted connection between culinary prowess and traditional patriarchal expectations prevalent in conservative Indian societies. Apart from eating, some food substances commonly found in all Indian kitchen, were also used to beautify the girls, and enhance their marital prospects. For instance, paste made from turmeric was to be applied on their faces to improve their complexions with their Aunt's advice that "nothing enhances a husband's affections like silk-soft skin," ringing in their ears. (Heart 108). Also, they were asked to chew the aromatic Indian spice – cardamoms every day to sweeten their mouths. It can be observed, that from preparing, serving, consuming to applying certain herbs and spices on their bodies, food semiotic is foregrounded here as an empowering agent, one that is inextricably linked with women's identity and position in society.

Food practices are integrally connected to the young women's overall training as well and Sarah Sceats in her book *Food, Consumption and the body in contemporary women's fiction* elaborates on this theme while commenting on the writing of Michele Roberts, who writes between both French and English traditions, " In much of Robert's writing, enculturation has particular significance for women, because it so often occurs through the preparation as well as eating of food and

because it involves special rules. Food preparation provides not only a means of training young women but an inculcation into some of the mysteries of adult female roles and perceptions." (Sceats 137) This rings true in the case of Sudha and Anju's lives as well as they receive culinary training not just to take charge of the kitchen spaces in their future households but as a field practice for readying them to assume household and familial responsibilities as befitting respectable married women of the elite Hindu Bengali community. As revealed from the above-mentioned illustrations from the selected novels, Divakaruni uses food as an extended metaphor and as a space of associations and symbols to signify a cultural sense of the collective.

Negotiating Migratory Memories through Food Rituals

Divakaruni incorporates culinary rituals in her novels to perform multiple functions – from reviving traditional bonds with the county of origin and carrying forward the subplots to symbolizing cross sections of different class, status, and community. *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines ritual as "a set of actions or words performed in a regular way, often as part of a religious ceremony". According to MH Abrams Glossary, social rituals are "set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies". Amitai Etzioni opines that there is "no intrinsic value or meaning" in the elements of any ritual; in fact, it is the overall group that provide significance to it. In the case of food rituals, we can see similar pattern – it is the symbolic meaning ascribed to specific food rituals and practices in each context that provide value to it. In an

article highlighting certain Buddhist culinary laws, it is mentioned that "the aim of mixing food is to obliterate the flavour of any individual part of the meal, so everything on your plate or in your bowl simply becomes food … In mixing the food all together, the monk blends the succulent offerings of the rich with the humble offerings of the poor. . . in some cases, mixing food might enhance flavour, and is in some cultures a way of increasing pleasure.

Ancient Indian texts offer an insight into the richness and expertise of culinary arts prevalent during those times. In an article titled *Pakadarpana: Culinary Repertoire of King Nala,* Ammini Ramachandran sheds light on the ancient Indian science of cooking, citing specifically the example of King Nala whose culinary repertoire was well known. Narrating the popular love story of Nala and Damayanti, she explores the wealth of culinary ingredients, flavors and techniques mentioned in the text *Pakadarpana*:

Although the exact dating of this manuscript is unavailable, it is fascinating that an impressive array of vegetables, meats, spices, flavourings, and souring agents as well as culinary techniques were used in the preparation of these dishes.... All these ingredients have beneficial medicinal properties and are still used in Indian herbal medicine Ayurveda. This cuisine realized the advantage of using different types of salts and specifies whether to use sea salt or rock salt in specific recipes.

The article describes the use of intriguing recipes involving fragrant flowers, palm leaves various herbs and berries, tamarind, pomegranate and the like and describes how "though content with native ingredients, this cuisine went out of its way to treat, transform and prepare them in a variety of ways. These recipes speak volumes about the expertise in high class cuisine that was prevalent in ancient India." Divakaruni's fictional narratives also depict typical Indian and Bengali cuisine as being elaborately prepared indulgences having extremely coveted healing properties. In the paper titled *Oh Calcutta! The New Bengal Movement in diasporic Indian English Fiction*, the researcher Somdatta Mandal makes an interesting observation that while Divakaruni's earlier novels included detailed glossary of Bengali and Hindi words that she had mentioned in her stories, her latest novels, "she has not only done away with italics and glossaries, but has been using deliberate Bengali and Hindi words within the text . . . Along with the culture specific "Lalmohan bird," "the palash flowers," "the sannyasis," the "rakkhosh," the "kalpurush," the text is filled with Bengali culinary details – "the crisp parotas," the khichuri made with rice and moong dal," the" kurma", the "chorchori" "the illish fish", the "narus," "the ghugni," or "bhate-bhat" (Mandal 15).

In the selected novels of Divakaruni there are many illustrations where food rituals and food habits practised in certain families are symbolic of the thinking pattern that exists across different cross-sections of the society. In SMH, there is a marked difference between the rituals practised in the respective household of Sudha and Anju's in-laws.

Mrs. Sanyal ensures that her "Natun Bau" Sudha manages the kitchen as well as other domestic chores. From chopping vegetables and serving everyone during mealtime to not showing any displeasure when criticized for food preparation, Sudha performs the role of a prefect, submissive, dutiful Indian daughter-in-law belonging to a rich but extremely conservative family settled in a small town. Divakruni has strategically used the food semiotic to highlight the plight of most young brides in typical arranged Indian marriage set up and to emphasizes the regressive expectations of in-laws. During her brief visit to the Sanyals, Anju observes the repressed behaviour of her friend and is upset at what she sees: "Throughout the visit, little things bite at me like ants. The way Sudha serves the family at dinnertime, even Ramesh's younger brother, cleaning up their spills and removing their dirty dishes. The way her smile doesn't falter when one of the boys pushes away his plate, telling her – the cheeky brat – that the fish curry didn't turn out right." (Divakaruni 194) The food semiotic emphasizes both sides of the coin – the condition of women in very conservative households and on the vastly different set up prevalent in modern, educated society as is observed in Anju's response to her friends' condition and her ability to confront the same. Irked by Sudha's meek and docile surrender to her mother-in-law's rule, she finally rebukes Sudha and questions her:" Why is it you who must make up the market list each day and hand out the spices for grinding and cut up the vegetables for lunch and dinner? (Divakaruni 195) Little does she realize that this is the unstated, unwritten but bare minimum

behaviour expected from any traditional Indian daughter-in-law and Sudha is merely trying her best to fit into the mould. Jessamyn Neuhaus in his analysis of 1950s cookbooks, opines on the connection between food practices and society, "Studying the eating patterns from a particular era may offer insights into society not readily available in standard social or political history (531) When it is discovered that after much ado, Sudha is finally pregnant, her autocratic mother-in-law is ecstatic and the culinary delicacies she lets Sudha indulge in depict that: "I am given the best portions – the coveted fish heads stewed with lentils and sprinkled with lemon, the crisp, golden-brown fried brinjals, the creamy top layer of the rice pudding that I love. When my mother-in-law called Calcutta to tell them my news, she asked Pishi about my favorite dishes. Now she makes sure Dinabandhu cooks at least one of them every day." [Divakaruni246] From pampering her unabashedly to getting her favorite cuisines, her changed behaviour depicts the concern a typical Indian mother-in-law has for her heir-to-be and that gets translated into taking extra care of the woman who's going to bear the grandchild. Of course, once it is discovered that Sudha is carrying a girl child, the affection turns to repulsion as the mother-in-law decides that the first born cannot be a girl and hence wants Sudha to get an abortion done. The food semiotic thus not only carries forward the plot, but also reveals the manner in which the different stages and status in a married Indian woman's life corresponds to the culinary indulgences she will be offered or allowed to partake of.

In OG too, food semiotic is employed to reveal different cross-sections of society – be it the low-income group, modern, elite or traditional Brahminical class – as represented by the chauffer Asif Ali, the Bose family and the Roy household respectively. There is a marked difference in the culinary rituals and practices followed at each of these households. In the foreword of the book, *Eating the Other: Translations of the Culinary Code*, the renowned semiologist and academician Ugo Villi expands on the Saussurian semiotic theory and explicates how the oppositional character can be applicable in not only linguistic but culinary system as well:

In order to be meaningful, every food system should be "ours" and not "theirs": we cook and eat this way, at this time, in this order, with these ingredients and without those others—because this is the polite way, the right recipe, and because this food is tasty, while others are disgusting. These oppositions can exist within one society—for instance underlining class, age, or clan distinctions. Or they can mark the boundaries between different societies, different structured layers (for instance, religious) of a society, and different cultures.... every way of feeding tells us first of all something about the differential identity of the people choosing it. (xiv)

In Korobi's fiancé Rajat's elitist, sophisticated home, an international culinary ambience prevails, wherein apart from Bengali dishes, western, continental cuisine is also indulged in. From the tiramisu that Rajat's father prepares in honour of an important guest to the personal

culinary favourites of the family members, their choices convey their modern tastes. It is interesting to note that the culinary practises followed at the Bose's engagement party corresponds to the entire ambience, including the guests, the serving etiquettes and dressing choices, "Waiters in turbans surround us with silver trays of shish kebabs and samosas and Western delights . . . More waiters come by, carrying drinks. Thin wine flutes on long stems, pale yellow, deep maroon, hoarding the light that spills down from the chandeliers. Squat crystal glasses filled with whiskey, sweating amber. (Divakaruni 27) The culinary semiotic evokes glamorous, high society norms that signal a drastic change from the traditional, Brahminical setting at the Roy's residence. Anticipating the cultural shock, Korobi's grandfather prefers to skip the engagement party altogether, confiding in Mr. Bose quite candidly: "I told you, Bose-babu, all that singing-dancing-alcohol-drinking – you know I don't approve. You're better off without me." (Divakaruni 22). The party ambience also conveys Korobi's discomfort and hesitancy as she takes her fledgeling steps into the elitist world of the Boses. Thus, from Saussarian semiotic perspective, food becomes an identity marker, setting up boundaries for different classes and clans.

As mentioned earlier, culinary rituals associated with Indian culture play a pivotal role in the novel QD, especially to combat racism. After the 9/11 tragedy, the customers at Rakhi's café regularly meet up and over the authentic Indian dishes, they try to find refuge and come to terms with the new hostility they have started encountering in their

adopted country. Thus, food becomes an essential element which fosters these strangers to gather at a common place, find support and strengthen their communal ties in the alien land.

The culinary semiotic transforms the kitchen and dining space of the Kurma House into a refuge where the victimized and marginalized diasporic community members can collectively process their grief and help each other heal. As Pazo comments about how sharing ritualized food proves to be . . . "an important reservoir of collective memory and transgenerational group awareness in contexts or loss and/or trauma, where culinary pleasure provides the immigrant community with a space where to assert their collective identity against discrimination, loss, and even violence." (143) Culinary motif is used to depict how Kurma House creates a unified cultural ethos where the vulnerable immigrants can realign, regroup, and renew their identities and negotiate ways to counter cultural attacks through food.

In the novel POI too, food has been at times presented as an alternative medium of communication, signifying position and power dynamics – be it in a clan or in the society at large. The "culinary test' that Draupadi must undergo is a kind of 'ritual' that is expected in most traditional Indian in-laws and the outcome of the test sets the tone, in a way for the bride's future married life. This scene is also in a way reminiscent of the culinary tests that the newly arrived diasporic identities have to face in the host land, uprooted from their original homeland. In POI, the first meeting between Kunti and Draupadi turns

out to be a culinary test of sorts. Kunti is aware that the princess Draupadi has very little experience in kitchen matters and yet she expects her to make her first meal for the entire family. Kunti deliberately provides bare minimum ingredients and is quite sure that Draupadi's lack of knowledge about cooking, especially in remote forest areas, will result in barely edible dishes. She makes this move intentionally to reiterate her central position in the lives of her sons, to prove to them that irrespective of any new additions to the family, their mother, who has always been the unifying, dominant force in their lives, will continue to remain so. She was not aware that Draupadi had been trained for some time by a sorceress, who it seems had anticipated her future mishaps and along with other "unqueenly skills" had taught her, "how to cook with the best of ingredients and the most meager." (Divakaruni 61 -62). She realizes that Kunti had set up a trap for her and if she fails, it will set the tone for the rest of her life, the first impression of her inability to cook up an edible lunch that will get imprinted on the minds of her husbands. As she admits to herself, "I understood. If the fish had been Arjun's test, this was mine." (Divakaruni 108) On asking Kunti for basic raw culinary spices like turmeric, chilies and cumin, she gets the rude response from the Queen, who replies in the negative and states, "This isn't your father's palace!" (Divakaruni 107) Realizing that she had suitably scared the new young bride into submission, the Queen then offers to prepare the lunch instead while she could do some other kitchen chore. Draupadi however, politely refuses the offer and admits that though her culinary

skills would be no match to those of the experienced Kunti, she requests her to let her try them out anyways and agrees to accept the blame if her food displeases Arjuna and his brothers. Then she closes her eyes, focuses on whatever skills the sorceress had taught her, and wills and prays and imagines a tasty dish being prepared, and opens her eyes only after the aroma fills her nostrils. The following lines effectively describe the feeling of victory felt by Draupadi as she knows that she has emerged winner in the first culinary battle with her daunting mother-in-law, "When at mealtime the brothers praised the brinjal for its distinctive taste and asked for more, I remained in the kitchen and let Kunti serve her sons. I kept my face carefully impassive, my eyes on the floor. But she and I both knew that *I'd won the first round*." (Divakaruni 111) (my emphasis). This culinary contest right at the start of her married life sets the tone for the way things work out in the future as well. The manner in which Draupadi doesn't succumb and yield to her circumstances, the poise and grace she displays under pressure, the way she holds her own against a formidable opponent and the resilience and acute intellect she uses in an adverse situation enables her to not only win the "first round" as she puts it, but foreshadows some of her characteristic traits which will help her in times of need as the unravelling of future events will reflect. The praise she earns from her husbands for the food prepared by her also are symbolic of the good impression she has made on them and foreshadow the considerable influence she will be able to exert on them. The complimentary words "distinctive taste" indicates their

liking of and hence submission to her unique touch and is later proven true when she decorates her palace as per her taste and receives lavish praise for the aesthetic appeal from one and all. It sends a message across to the Queen as well that she has now met an equally worthy match and so she should give up any hopes of her daughter-in-law toeing the line or acquiescing to her instructions. She also realizes that the central position she has hitherto occupied in the lives of her sons will now have to be shared as they are suitably impressed not only by the new bride's beauty but her cooking prowess as well.

By examining food voices in Divakaruni's novels, it is observed that food motif is used to reveal a variety of emotions expressed by the Indian diasporic members in the chosen texts. Food and kitchen space becomes cultural markers, and the culinary identities consolidate their cultural identities in the host country. Another perspective that seems to be applicable in the case of Divakaruni's diasporic characters too involve Gabaccia's commentary regarding the American eating habits and how when people share foods within families and communities "they pass on food lore and create stories and myths about food's meaning and taste; they celebrate rites of passage and religious beliefs with distinctive dishes. Food thus entwines intimately with much that makes a culture unique, binding taste and satiety to group loyalties. Eating habits both symbolize and mark the boundaries of cultures." [Americans 8] It is interesting to note that Rakhi's friend Belle is also Americanized and resents her parents' idea of getting an arranged marriage. She fears that if she gets married to a 'suitable' boy of their

community, she will have to dress in *salwar kameezzes* – the typical North Indian community attire and dole out *makhi ki rotis* for her in-laws, something that she cannot imagine herself doing. She associates the regressive mindset of her traditional community with their culinary preferences, and she cannot, for the life of her, see herself fulfilling the culinary demands or any other expectations that the first generation would seek from her.

In *Oleander Girl,* which switches between Kolkata and America, we get glimpses into the psychology of numerous characters through their culinary preparations and preferences. In Korobi's household, it is the traditional, authentic Bengali cuisine prepared elaborately by the family cook in an elaborate manner, which is the norm. Apart from the authentic recipes, the readers also get an insight into the close, family bond that exists with long-time servants in Indian households. Whether it is giving in to impromptu improvisations, grumbling about domestic issues, cooking for important celebratory functions, or conspiring with family members to placate fiery tempers, the cook at the Roy household is given a free hand. The utmost affection with which she is treated by the family members and their guests alike reflects her stature in the employer's family. When the grandmother realizes that they are short on money and so will have to cut down on expenditure, the "cook decrees that she will make only one dal and one vegetable for their meals. A little rice, a few chapatis. No more of that expensive Darjeeling tea. They'll switch to plain black. She goes around the house like a policeman on a beat, turning off lights and fans in empty

rooms. (Divakaruni 135) The use of the word “decrees” and the description of the cook’s concern about financial issues and her individual steps to curtail expenditures implies her significant place she holds in the family’s home and hearts.

The first chapter itself where the cook is introduced describes the affectionate back-and-forth between the owner and cook, which is part of the regular routine, “Cook berates the neighbour’s cat for attempting to filch a piece of fish. Bimal summons Cook in querulous tones. Where on earth is his morning tea? His Parle-G biscuits? Cook replies (but not loud enough for Bimal to hear) that she doesn’t have ten arms like the goddess.” (Divakaruni 6) During Korobi’s engagement ceremony at home, the cook and other domestic helps come to stand alongside the family members for the family photo, as if it is a natural, correct thing to do, “Under the pretext of bringing lime sherbet and cashew nuts, the servant venture into the frame, for how can there be a family portrait without them?” (Divakaruni 20).

Not only the household helps, but the manner in which the culinary smells, sounds and sights are also incorporated in the engagement photograph has been described effectively: “An ice-cream man passes by the gate. The tinkle of his cart bell becomes part of the picture, as do the smells of the engagement lunch: cauliflower khichuri, sauteed pumpkin (Cook is given to sudden, wild improvisations), rice pudding sweetened with palm molasses, and yes, scorched fish-fry.” (Divakaruni 20) Rajat too, is quite fond of the Cook’s traditional

preparations and even at the end of the novel, after facing many upheavals and undergoing trials that tested their love and loyalty for each other, when Rajat and Korobi finally get back together again, to enjoy the moment, Rajat suggests requesting the Cook to "make us some of her special mihidana dessert in celebration." (Divakaruni 280) Not only that the Cook plays an integral role in the "conspiracy of love" which has been hatched by Korobi's grandmother and Rajat to pacify Korobi and bring the lovers together (280).

Celebratory Food Rituals

Food has tremendous significance in Indian religion and culinary rituals practised by Indians at home and abroad helps strengthen the bond with the motherland, preserve their unique identity and unify the community. Mostly all sacred Indian texts are replete with culinary references and interesting anecdotes related to food. Strict directives have been mentioned in our ancient scriptures regarding the type of food to be prepared, the technique used, the manner of serving and the right occasion for it. Most of the Indian gods and goddesses are supposed to have their own personal culinary preferences, and the devotees are to keep those in mind. As per Indian mythology and texts, are food is also deeply connected to the different phases of the moon and hence culinary instructions have been laid down for certain special days as well – the no moon day. and full moon day. Many people observe fast during these days and nourish themselves with specific diet – comprising mainly of milk and fruits, prescribed specially for

those days. Culinary rituals are also prescribed for strengthening marital bonds and most Indian women enjoy fasting and praying for long life of their husbands on 'karva chauth', and 'teej'. In a few such special festive days, we find that the entire day's fasting is followed at night by feasting on sumptuous delights prepared for the occasion. Apart from fostering familial bonding and festive spirit, celebrating certain days while adhering to the prescribed culinary rituals breaks the monotony of the usual routine and restores and rejuvenates people, and this is especially true in the diasporic context. In most Indian festivals, it was considered a religious duty to serve food to the poor and needy and to the Brahmins and sadhus before celebrations begin at one's homes. Even today, many families practice this and on special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries as well as on festivals, distribute food in packets or any other form freely to either visiting devotees at temples or to servants and poor people residing in the vicinity. Of course, it is a well-known fact that offering food to the gods is an important aspect of the Hindu worship. Certain practices may be modified according to different states and communities, but it is certainly followed by most Hindus. As per our scriptures, even the birth we take in any lifetime is connected to the kind of food we have consumed in our previous birth. Our personality types have also been categorised in sync with the type of food we eat. In many yogic books it is explicated that to inculcate certain qualities in an individual, he or she needs to strictly adhere to certain culinary habits. Jayaram V, in the article, *Hinduism, Food and Fasting*, J describes the same: "What

we eat decides our physical well-being as well as our mental makeup. If we eat sattvic food (pure food) we become sattvic (pure) beings. If we heat rajasic food (hot and spicy) we become rajasic (ambitious, temparamental, egoistic etc). If we eat animal food or intoxicating foods, we may develop animal qualities and lethargic nature."

Divakaruni's characters too practice culinary rituals to celebrate functions and festivals. As the following extract reveals, even an anticipated 'good news' such as a visit from an Indian family member or close friend is an occasion to celebrate: "All the recipes she looked up painstakingly in her *Good Housekeeping* cookbook. It is *the most Indian of ways*, what the women of her family had done to show love through the years of her childhood, that simple time which she longs for more and more as her adult plans seem to collapse around." [Desire20] [my emphasis]

These lines taken from Divakaruni's novel The Vine of Desire, describes the activities going on in US based Bengali immigrant Anju's kitchen in anticipation of her best friend Sudha's arrival from India. Anju's emotional excitement and gratitude knows no bounds as she looks forward to finally being reunited with her soul sister Sudha, who is travelling all the way from across the seven seas to be with her. Anju starts preparing for the momentous occasion by cooking various dishes in advance by following recipes from cookbooks. As the author mentions that since her childhood, she had known that cooking was indeed "the most Indian of ways" that has been used by the community

and that “the women of her family had done to show love.” Of course, the next sentence reflects that she is pining for the simple times of the bygone childhood days which seem to be evading her more and more. As this extract indicates, the culinary memories are entangled with severe nostalgia for the good old days and yearning to return ‘back home’ and simultaneously these memories also have strong cultural associations and symbolic values. By following the age-old tradition of expressing feelings of love and gratitude through food and food related rituals, the diasporic protagonist Anju, reinstates the author’s own beliefs about the efficacy of the culinary motif in the face of dire circumstances when “her adult plans seem to collapse around” in the alienated host land. Philipa Kafka opines that Divakaruni is one diasporic author who writes with “Obvious compassion and full understanding of Indian women who go west” (Kafka 26). Divakaruni’s works are interspersed with many such references/extracts which reflect the close, intricate connection between the culinary and culture and the crucial role it plays in the psychological and physical healing of the community members. This nostalgia for the authentic home food is symbolic of the reverence of the culinary rituals followed back in the homeland and following these ancestral notions or ideas helps the exiled migrant to re-establish their connection with their country of origin.

In the article “*Consuming Food and Constructing Identities among Arabic and South Asian Immigrant Women*”, Kim Raine and Helen Vallainatos comment on this need to continue with these culinary

rituals by saying, “Food also connects across time and place, for many migrants, food is an essential component of maintaining connections at home. How and what kind of food consumed recall families and friends left behind and by continuing to consume both everyday and celebratory foods migrants enact their companionship with those back home.” (355) Thus, by painstakingly looking up dishes from recipe books and cooking elaborate dishes for Sudha, well in advance of her arrival, Anju is strictly adhering to the age old Indian culinary tradition of hospitality, expressing love and joy through laborious preparation of celebratory foods which in turn, further reinforces the “companionship with those back home.” This extract also reflects the culinary space slowly transforming into a space where ties with the mother land are re-established.

In Divakaruni’s fiction, the food and kitchen space are not relegated to the background but are central to her narratives. The culinary plays varied roles and Paulo Torriero, Pazo’s statement on the role of food in culinary memoirs as “identity marker, an act of trust and love, a bond or a chasm between generations of immigrants, or the symbolic material grounds of memory, superstitions, and religious beliefs . . . “(144) is applicable in the case of Divakaruni’s fiction too. She depicts the kitchen space as one where existing familial bond are strengthened, new relationships are fostered and ties with homeland are renewed through practicing traditional culinary rituals. In QD, Rakhi while recollecting memories of the initial happy phase of her married life remembers how she tried the typical Indian woman’s way of

expressing love through the culinary skills, “this was when she still cooked elaborate meal appetizers, rotis rolled out fresh, rich curries in almond sauce, traditional Indian desserts that required hours of culinary acrobatics.” (Divakruni 12) Even though she is born and bred in USA and belongs to the second-generation Bengali immigrant family, she still tries to follow the Indian traditional rituals and uses “culinary acrobatics” to further impress her husband and maintain good marital relationship. To compensate for Sanjay Dewan’s sad cake-less childhood birthdays, his wife Bela makes it a family ritual of sorts to churn out the best culinary feasts on his special day, “Bela made him cakes from scratch, layered with fresh strawberries and buttercream, embellished decadently with coconut-almond frosting. She cooked dinners over which their guests sighed in envious pleasure: an Italian feast, all the way from antipasti to gelato; a Hawaiian luau, complete with roasted pig . . .” (Divakruni 165) His birthday celebrations post marriage are such a stark contrast to his sad childhood celebratory days and the efforts his wife makes to ensure that his painful bygone memories are erased is symbolic of the affection she holds for him in her heart. It also evokes the image of the typical good Indian wife who leaves no ‘culinary’ stone unturned to please her husband, strengthen their relationship and foster familial bonds.

This chapter titled ‘Culinary Memories and Rituals in Divakaruni’s selected novels’ explores the depiction of food and kitchen space in Divakaruni’s fiction, especially within the theoretical framework of Barthes and Saussure’s semiotic perspective. Through the culinary

motif, not just personal traits but also the unique characteristics of the cultural history of the original motherland are revealed. Through its cultural associations, food space transforms into a sort of repository of traditional, native value system. The chapter analyses how in Divakaruni's select novels, the culinary space transforms into a comfort zone of sorts where the new uprooted diasporic members find refuge and solace. The culinary semiotic reveals how through the familiar culinary sights, smells and tastes the newly arrived immigrants feel connected to their tradition and family and motherland. From Bhabha's perspective, food functions as an 'interstice': a kind of an overlapping space where the entire spectrum of the diasporic members experience is being played out. Culinary memories and rituals help them stay connected to their original roots and helps them navigate their paths in the new alien terrain of the host country.